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ABSTRACT

Grounded in Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model of the parental involvement process, this study examined links between empirically suggested manifestations of children's invitations and parents' levels of involvement in children's homework activities. Relevant literature suggested the potential importance of four child attributes in inviting parents' homework involvement: (1) child's general level of performance; (2) child's experience of difficulty with daily homework; (3) child's developmental press for independence; and (4) child's valuing of the parent's involvement activities. Twenty public school fourth graders and their parents (one per child) were interviewed individually and responded to questionnaires; data on child school performance were gathered from school records (6-week report cards for the full year; standardized achievement test results for the year). Findings suggested very modest links between higher levels of parental involvement and higher work difficulty as reported by parents, lower child press for independence as reported by parents, as well as lower general levels of performance as reflected in child interviews and school grades. Child valuing of parental help was linked weakly to parental involvement (stronger child valuing of parents' involvement activities was positively related to child reports of more parental involvement.) These and other findings were considered in light of qualitative patterns of parent and child observations in the interview data set, as were implications for theoretical understanding of variables contributing to parents' involvement decisions. Based on findings, suggestions were devised for teachers and parents wishing to increase the incidence and effectiveness of parents' involvement in their elementary children's education. (Contains 33 references.) (Author/KB)

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"Can you help me with my homework?"

Elementary school children's invitations and perspectives on parental involvement

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Abstract

Grounded in Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1995, 1997) model of the parental involvement process, the study examined links between empirically suggested manifestations of children's invitations and parents' levels of involvement in one aspect of their children's education, homework activities. Relevant literature suggested the potential importance of four child attributes in inviting parents' homework involvement: child's general level of performance, child's experience of difficulty with day to day schoolwork, child's developmental press for independence, and child's valuing of the parent's involvement activities. Twenty public school fourth grade children and their parents (one per child) were interviewed individually and responded to questionnaires; data on child school performance were gathered from school records (six-week report cards for the full year; standardized achievement test results for the year). Results suggested very modest links between higher levels of parental involvement and higher work difficulty (as reported by parents), lower child press for independence (as reported by parents), as well as lower general levels of performance (as reflected in child interviews and school grades). Child valuing of parental help was linked weakly to parental involvement (stronger child valuing of parents' involvement activities was positively related to child reports of more parental involvement). These and other results are discussed in light of qualitative patterns of parent and child observations in the interview data set. Implications for theoretical understanding of variables contributing to parents' involvement decisions are discussed, as are suggestions for teachers and parents wishing to increase the incidence and effectiveness of parents' involvement in their elementary children's education.

Recent reviews of research have underscored many of the complex influences on contemporary parents as they seek to help their children develop well in personal, social and academic domains (e.g., Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Heatherington, & Bornstein, 2000). These influences include the reciprocal nature of relationships between the family and other systems within which children develop (e.g., schools, churches, day care programs; e.g., Epstein, 1992; Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1992) as well as reciprocal influences within families themselves (e.g., parents' influence on children, children's upon parents; e.g., Belsky, 1981; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994). Several developmental psychologists have suggested that children's attributes and behaviors exert general and specific influence on parents' behavior toward them (e.g., Kochanska, 1993; Scarr & McCartney, 1983), and related work on parental involvement in children's education has suggested similarly that parents and children alike appear to contribute uniquely to the form, function, and effectiveness of parents' involvement activities (e.g., Grolnick, Weiss, McKenzie, & Wrightman, 1996; Paulson, 1994; Reynolds, 1992). Taken together, the research suggests that a solid understanding of parents' school involvement decisions requires an understanding of children's perspectives on parents' involvement and an equally strong understanding of children's invitations--explicit and implicit--to their parents' involvement.

Such an understanding is embedded in Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1995, 1997) model of the parental involvement process (see Figure 1). The model suggested that parents

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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become involved in their children's education as a function of four major constructs: parents' role construction for involvement (what do parents believe they are supposed to do in relation to the child's education?), parents' sense of efficacy for helping the child succeed in school (do parents believe that their involvement efforts will make a positive difference in the child's educational outcomes?), parents' perception of general invitations from the teacher and school (do parents perceive that the school extends opportunities and demands for their involvement?), and parents' perception of general invitations from the child (do parents perceive opportunities and 'points of entry' from the child in relation to the child's school tasks and accomplishments?).

This study undertook an exploratory examination of general invitations from the child as a contributor to parents' involvement in the child's education. The specific domain of involvement selected for study was children's homework, chosen because it represents one of the most consistent points of intersection among schools, parents, and children in the day to day work of children's education (e.g., Cooper, 1989; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Burow, 1995). We examined these relationships relatively intensively in a small sample of children and parents at the fourth grade level, an age at which developmental and curricular issues often appear to precipitate a decrease in parental involvement in the child's day to day schooling (Note 1). We expected that children and parents engaged in fourth grade activities would offer an informative 'window' on the function and influence of child invitations to parents' decisions about involvement in their children's education.

Varied research has suggested that children's general invitations to involvement are likely to emanate from four primary sources. These sources–child attributes found in varied studies to

influence some aspects of parents' decisions about involvement in the child's education–include general academic performance level (represented in summary measures of achievement such as report card grades, standardized test scores), the child's experience of difficulty with day to day schoolwork, the child's press for independence, and the child's valuing of parental help.

Child's general level of academic performance has been related both positively (e.g., Clark, 1993; Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Delgado-Gaitan, 1992) and negatively (Baker & Stevenson, 1986; Clark, 1993; Eccles & Harold, 1993; Pratt, Green, MacVicar, & Bountrogianni, 1992) to parents' levels of involvement in children's education. Reflecting on this variability in the direction of the relationship, Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) suggested that parental involvement likely varies in accordance with general level of performance, increasing in response to poor performance, leveling off or decreasing in the wake of good performance. Supporting this suggestion, Hoover-Dempsey et al. (1995) found that parents think about their involvement in homework in part in relation to their perceptions of the child's general performance level. While the careful longitudinal work necessary to unravel the direction of effects has yet to be accomplished, this body of work suggests that children's general level of school performance functions in some way for parents as a child attribute inviting or depressing active engagement in the child's school-related activities.

The variable evidence on the relationship between children's general academic achievement and parental involvement suggests fundamentally that parents respond to individual differences in performance. Given the fact that *general* levels of performance are often measured by periodic summary measures, parents may also seek or attend to more consistently available and task-specific evidence of children's school performance. This more specific information is most logically available in children's day to day levels of difficulty with work. In fact, children have been found more likely to seek adult help with work in subjects that they consider difficult (e.g., math; Stodolsky, 1985) and are more likely to increase help-seeking activities when new material is presented (Paris & Newman, 1990). Consistent with Hoover-Dempsey et al.'s (1995) findings that parents often monitor the child's on-going work for evidence of the child's *need* for the parent's engagement, children's difficulty or help-seeking with homework appears to be a salient child attribute pertinent to the parent's perception of invitations to involvement.

In the normal developmental span covered by the elementary years, children begin to move from dependence on parents to increasing interest in establishing spheres of independent influence and action. In fact, from the earliest grades on into middle childhood, children often shift from strong reliance on parents to higher levels of independent thinking and action (e.g., Dix & Grusec, 1985, Grolnick, Ryan, & Deci, 1991). Interest in personal competence and mastery, as well as increased awareness of sources of influence and assistance outside of the family (e.g., peers, teachers, coaches), contribute to this transition for many children. The shift from other-regulated to self-regulated behaviors (Zimmerman, 2000) bears strong implications for parents as they contemplate responding to the normative emergence of a press for independence from their children. For example, Hoover-Dempsey et al. (1995) found that parents treated their elementary children's emerging independence as a complex issue and worked hard to balance the child's expressed needs for help with their own ideas about what the child should (and should not) try to accomplish on his or her own. We expected, thus, that parents' perceptions of the child's press

for independence would function as a child attribute inviting, or depressing, parents' levels of involvement in the child's schooling.

Finally, a small body of work has suggested that the child's valuing of parental help might well invite parents' involvement in children's homework. Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski, and Apostoleris (1997), for example, reported that mothers who rated their children as more difficult to deal with recorded more negative attitudes toward involvement, and recorded less cognitive involvement with the child, less 'keeping up' with the child's schooling, and less school involvement than did mothers who held more positive views of their children. Hoover-Dempsey et al. (1995) found that parents derived enjoyment from successfully helping their children learn and evaluated the adequacy of their own parenting abilities in part according to their perceptions of their effectiveness in helping their children succeed at school tasks. Similarly, Eccles and Harold (1994) reported that parents with more positive views of their children were more involved in their schooling.

Thus, the study examined relationships between the four variables representing child invitations to parental involvement and parents' levels of involvement in the child's homework. Because varied developmental theorists and researchers have suggested that the perceptions of each person in the parent-child relationship are important to understanding the reciprocal interactions in which they are involved (e.g., Belsky, 1981; Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1992)–and because varied investigators have reported differences in parent and child perceptions of ostensibly the same phenomena (e.g., Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Reynolds, 1992)–we examined both child and parent reports of the child attributes and parental involvement activities of interest. We were interested in the reports and perceptions of each, the 'match' between parent and child reports, and links between both groups' perceptions of child invitations variables and parents' involvement activities.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 20 public school fourth grade children and their parents (one parent per child). The children were from a single classroom in a large metropolitan school district serving an ethnically and socioeconomically diverse population. The child group included 11 female and nine male students; 13 were Caucasian and seven were African-American. Fourteen of the children's parents were married; six were from single-parent homes. Average parent education level was one to two years of post-secondary education, in a range that included grade school completion through graduate degrees. Average socioeconomic status of participating families (using Hollingshead's two factor index of social position; Myers & Bean, 1968) was 2.90 (s.d. = .91) on a scale of 5 = highest class to 1 = lowest class.

Comparison of participating (n = 20) with non-participating (n = 6) children from the classroom revealed no differences between groups in average report card grades for the year (reading, math, and language), but the presence of differences in achievement test results; TCAP Total Battery Scores were higher for participating than non-participating children ($\bar{x}$ = 62.25 [s.d. = 31.28] v. $\bar{x}$ = 40.83 [s.d. = 38.04]; $t = 7.60$, $p < .001$). Study results should be interpreted with this difference in mind.

Procedures

Letters describing the research were sent home with all children in the class (n = 26). Positive responses were received from 20 children and parents; all of these parent-child pairs were included in the study. Child participants responded individually to a questionnaire and were interviewed during free periods in a quiet, relatively private area of the school. Parent participants responded to the parent questionnaire and were interviewed individually at times of their own choosing at the school (in a similar quiet area of the building) or by phone (seven parents requested a phone interview; these parents received and returned the parent questionnaire by mail). In general, child interviews took 20-25 minutes to complete; parent interviews usually lasted from 30–45 minutes. All interviews were tape recorded with permission; tapes were transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis.

Measures

Measures of study variables were derived from individual interviews with children and parents, from child and parent questionnaire reports, and from school records.

The interview protocol for children included questions about perceptions of homework (e.g., what homework they have, how they do it), performance in school and experience of difficulty with homework (e.g., a school assignment that was hard/easy for the child), parental help with homework (e.g., what the parent does when he/she helps, whether the child has to ask for help), and the usefulness of parents' help (e.g., what parental activities help and why). Parents' interview protocol asked about the same issues from the parent's perspective (e.g., child's homework, responses to homework, difficulties with homework, general school performance, parent's homework involvement activities, perceptions of the usefulness of parent's involvement activities); the parent interview also included questions about the child's typical responses to the parent's involvement (e.g., how does the child usually respond to your help?). Interview transcripts were reviewed by trained coders for quantitative and qualitative analytic purposes. In general, all discrete pertinent statements were coded as fitting particular study variable categories (child invitations [general level of performance, difficulty with homework, press for independence, valuing of parental help] and parent's level of involvement). Groupings of statements were subsequently categorized further (e.g., as positive or negative, as representing graduated responses to a specific variable); statements within categories were enumerated and used to derive qualitative understanding of patterns observed in quantitatively grounded findings. In some circumstances, coders also assigned summary or global 'reviewer ratings' to parent and child interviews with reference to study variables (e.g., "Overall, how much child press for independence is reflected in the respondent's comments?") on a scale of one (lowest levels) to six (highest levels). Two trained coders worked on all interview protocols; any instances of disagreement were discussed until consensus was reached. All coding and summary ratings, thus, represented full consensus between the two reviewers.

Additional data came from two questionnaires designed for the study, *Thinking About My Homework* (TAMH) for children and *Thinking About My Child's Homework* (TAMCH) for parents. Items for both questionnaires were derived from Hoover-Dempsey et al.'s (1995) report of parents' perceptions, strategies, and actions related to involvement in children's homework. Piloted with a comparable group of elementary students and their parents, the two questionnaires each contained a major subscale used in this study, described in further detail below. Finally, data

used in the study were derived from school records: a review of each child's 6-week reports cards for the full year and school reports on each child's standardized achievement test scores for the year.

Specific measures used for each study variable are described below.

Child's general level of academic performance

Four measures of child's general level of performance were derived from school records, child interviews, parent interviews. The child's *report card grades* in each of three subjects--reading, language, and math--were assigned numerical values (13 = A+ to 1 = F). The grades received during the full set of 6-week report cards during the year were summed and divided by the number of six-week reporting periods. The average numerical grade for reading, language and math were then summed. Composite grades ranged from 18 to 39, with higher numbers reflecting a higher average grade for the year in the three subjects. The child's *standardized achievement test (TCAP) Total Battery scores* in fourth grade were used as a second measure of general academic performance. The child interview measure consisted of the *reviewers' rating of the child's report of his or her overall performance* in school as reflected in the full interview transcript. Ratings were assigned on a six-point scale, with higher ratings reflecting more positive child assessment of his or her general performance in school (6 = child believes his/her performance is very good; 1 = child believes his/her performance is very poor). A parallel parent interview measure included *the reviewers' rating of the parents' report of the the child's overall performance* in school as reflected in the full parent interview transcript. Again, ratings were assigned on a six-point scale, with higher ratings reflecting more positive parental assessment of the child's performance in school (6 = parent believes child's performance is very good; 1 = parent believes child's performance is very poor).

Difficulty with homework

The child's difficulty with work was assessed with two measures derived from child and parent interviews. The child interview-derived measure was created by combining scores for three interview components: a) number of child comments that work is difficult (score 3), of intermediate difficulty (score 2), or easy (score 1), summed and divided by total number of comments reflecting the child's evaluation of work difficulty, b) number of child comments that the child needs a lot of help (score 4), some help (score 3), does not need help often (score 2), or rarely needs help (score 1), summed and divided by total number of comments reflecting how much the child needs help and c) the reviewers' general rating of the child's experience of difficulty with the work as reflected in the full child interview. Higher scores on this composite measure reflected greater *child reports of difficulty with homework*. The parent interview-derived measure was created similarly, by combining scores for three interview components: a) number of parent comments that the child finds work difficult (score 3), of intermediate difficulty (score 2), or easy (score 1), summed and divided by total number of comments reflecting the parent's evaluation of how difficult the child perceives his or her work to be, b) number of parent comments that the child needs a lot of help (score 4), some help (score 3), does not need help often (score 2), or rarely needs help (score 1), summed and divided by total number of parent comments reflecting that the child needs help and c) the reviewers' general rating of the parent's evaluation of the child's experience of difficulty with the work as reflected in the full parent

interview. Higher scores on this composite measure reflected greater *parent perceptions of child difficulty with homework.*

Press for independence

Child and parent interviews were reviewed for evidence of child press for independence. Each set (20 child interviews, 20 parent interviews) was subjected to a forced distribution based on reviewers' general ratings of evidence within the interview related to the child's apparent press for independence. Each set of interviews was distributed, 25% (n = 5) per category, across four rating categories (4 = strongest press for independence, 3 = moderate press for independence, 2 = modest press for independence, 1 = weakest press for independence). Two trained reviewers distributed each set across categories; reviewers achieved full consensus on distributions of the parent interview set and the child interview set. The measures thus derived reflects *child press for independence* (child interview set) and *parent's perception of child's press for independence* (parent interview set). In both instances, higher scores reflected greater child press for independence.

Valuing of parental help

Child valuing of parental help was assessed by three measures, one derived from child interviews, two from parent interviews. *Child's report of valuing parental help* was measured by the score derived from the total number of statements in each interview reflecting the child's belief that the parent's help is great (score 4), usually helpful/ok (score 3), not so helpful/sometimes not helpful (score 2), or not helpful (score 1). Each interview's total score was summed and divided by the total number of statements referring to quality of parental help; higher scores reflected greater child valuing of parents' help. *Parent's perception of child's valuing of help* was measured in the same way using the parent interview data set; higher scores reflected parental perceptions of greater child valuing of his or her help. Parent interviews were also examined for *parent's perception of the affective quality of the child's responses to his or her helping activities*. These scores were derived from the total number of parent interview statements suggesting that the child liked his or her help, divided by the total number of statements in the interview suggesting that the child did not like the parent's help or reacted negatively to it. Higher scores indicated more positive parental perceptions of the child's affective responses to his or her helping activities.

Level of parental involvement in homework

Four measures of the dependent variable, level of parental involvement in the child's homework, were derived from interview and questionnaire sources. *Child perceptions of parent's level of involvement in homework* were assessed with an overall reviewer's rating of the level of parental involvement in the child's homework as reflected in each full interview transcript. Reviewers, who achieved consensus on all ratings, used a 6-point scale (6 = most or highly involved, 1 = least or minimally involved). Essentially, this rating reflected the overall quantity of parental help with homework. *Parental reports of level of involvement in the child's homework* were assessed similarly with an overall reviewer's rating of the level of parental involvement reflected in each full interview transcript (6 = most or highly involved, 1 = least or minimally involved). Two other measures of level of parental involvement in homework were derived from the two questionnaires used in the study, Thinking About My Homework (TAMH: child) and

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Thinking About My Child's Homework (TAMCH: parent). Each questionnaire contained a 17-item subscale *(Child perceptions of parent's structuring and activities related to homework; Parent perceptions of parent's structuring and activities related to homework)*. The subscales contained identical items, with slight variations as appropriate for respondent (e.g, "My mom checks my homework;" "I check his homework" [Note 2]). Using a four-point response scale (always, usually, sometimes, never), child respondents were asked such items as: "My dad tells me to correct any mistakes I make on my homework;" "My mom helps me with math homework;" "My dad tells me I've done a good job on my homework"). Parallel items for parents, using the same response scale, included "I tell my child to correct any mistakes she makes on her homework;" "I help her with math homework;" "I tell her she's done a good job on her homework"). Alpha reliability for the child TAMH subscale was .79; for the parent TAMCH subscale, .80. Essentially, this measure reflected the parent's structuring of homework-related activities or the quality of parental help with homework.

Results

Means, standard deviations, and correlations for study variables are reported in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Findings for relationships between *parents'* reports of level of involvement in homework and child invitations for parental involvement (general level of academic performance, difficulty with homework, press for independence and valuing of parental help) suggested that higher levels of involvement were associated with higher levels of work difficulty (as reported by the parent, $r = .55$, $p<.05$) and lower levels of child press for independence (as reported by the parent, $r = -.45$, $p<.05$). Relationships between *child* reports of level of parent involvement in homework and child invitations for parental involvement suggested that higher levels of involvement (as reported by children) were associated with lower levels of child press for independence (as reported by the parent, $r = -.51$, $p<.05$) and higher levels of child valuing of help (as reported by the child, $r = .48$, $p<.05$). Findings for one measure of involvement in particular–parental structuring of homework–suggested that higher parental structuring was associated with lower child academic performance (as reported in the parent interviews $r = -.49$, $p<.05$, and in report card grades, $r = -.52$, $p<.05$).

Findings for relationships within the set of child invitations variables suggested that children's reports of difficulty with homework were negatively related to children's reports of academic performance ($r = -.61$, $p<.005$) and press for independence ($r = -.71$, $p<.001$). Parent reports of the child's difficulty with homework were negatively related to parents' perceptions of child press for independence ($r = -.57$, $p<.01$). Parents' reports of involvement as reflected in efforts to structure homework were negatively related to children's school achievement ($r = -.52$, $p>.05$) and children's reports of their own performance ($r = -.49$, $p>.05$).

Examination of the 'match' between child and parent reports of parent activities to structure homework reflected agreement on the content and structure of parents' involvement (TAMH with TAMCH $r = .51$, $p<.05$). Child and parent interviews, however, reflected

minimal consistency between the two sources in any of the variables assessed: perceptions of parents' involvement ($r = .28$, ns), child's general level of academic performance ($r = .36$, ns), child's difficulty with homework ($r = .01$, ns), child's press for independence ($r = .04$, ns), and child's valuing of parents' help ($r = -.38$, ns). Possible reasons for the disparity between questionnaire and interview measures are discussed below.

Discussion

The results of this exploratory study offered modest support for some of the hypothesized links between child invitations and parental involvement in children's education. Viewed as an exploratory test of Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1995, 1997) assertion that general invitations from children contribute to parents' decisions about becoming involved, these data suggest that children's invitations may or not be as theoretically potent as other theorized contributors to parental involvement: parental role construction, parental efficacy, and parental perceptions of invitations to involvement from the school and the child's teachers (e.g., Hoover-Dempsey & Jones, 2000; Reed, Jones, Walker, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2000). Thus, children's general invitations to involvement might be seen as a marginal contributor, not a pillar, in the model's explanation of the parental involvement process.

Also of interest was the finding that children's and parents' accounts of parental involvement were quite similar when assessed with a questionnaire (TAMH and the parent counterpart, TAMCH), but seemed rather unrelated when assessed in independent interviews. The disparity between questionnaire and interview measures suggested that when given an identical, clearly defined set of specific questions with limited response options, child and parent reports reflected common views of parent's involvement activities. When asked more broadly construed questions with open-ended response options, however, children and parents appeared to move in different directions, guided by their different developmental perspectives and their different interests in the process. Children appeared to take homework and parents' availability for involvement as a given--something that simply 'is' or 'should be' a part of life. Far more than was evident in their children's comments, parents thought about their involvement, worried over the best ways to handle it, wrestled with how to be appropriately helpful, and experimented with withdrawing support when they felt their children's independent work abilities needed strengthening. Given the difference in personal perspectives on the involvement process, it is perhaps not surprising that parents and children's comments in response to open-ended inquiry, should reflect different content and emphases.

The study's results serve as a valuable window into the process of parent involvement in homework. Specifically, lower child performance (manifested in child's grades and child's interview comments), higher difficulty with work, and lower press for independence (both manifested in parents' interview comments) were associated with higher levels of parental involvement. These results suggested that the parents of these fourth grade students were motivated toward involvement in homework because of the children's lower grades, greater experience of difficulty with work, and children's own perceptions of poor performance. Findings revealing a high level of interdependence among difficulty with work, child perceptions of academic accomplishment, and press for independence suggests that children's invitations work together to invite parental involvement. Future research might examine these invitations

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separately and in combination to determine more precisely their contributions to parental involvement.

Children who reported more parental involvement in interviews also recorded more explicit valuing of parental help, suggesting a theme underscored often in children's interview comments. As a group, the children tended to assume their parents would help them, and tended to be quite positive about that help. All children offered positive comments about parents' help and clear reasons for their positive attitudes. For example, some suggested, *"She's like the teacher and makes things easier."* Others appeared to value most highly that their parents were available and responsive to requests for help; one observed, for example, *"Sometimes I really, really need help, and all I have to do is ask my mom and she'll help me;"* another summarized his evaluation of his dad's help: *"Whenever I ask him, he's there for me."* Caught between the task demands of homework and their developmental ability to complete homework assignments successfully on their own, children's observations reflected strong valuing of even the simplest parental help activities (e.g., asking the child about his or her assignments, being available to help). Very few of the children offered any criticism of parents' involvement activities. In the few instances where this occurred, a parent's periodic lack of understanding of the work was noted; for example, *"My mom doesn't specialize in subjects, and I think if she did, it'd really help me."*

Although some parents suggested that their children were pressing for greater independence (*"Sometimes she just doesn't want nothing to do with my help!"*), the children in this group rarely expressed a wish for more independence. If some indeed pressed their parents to 'let them do the work by themselves,' as some parents suggested, the children offered little explicit awareness or acknowledgment of doing so. Children appeared to assume that parents were (or should be) a readily available means of meeting any immediate needs for help with schoolwork. Thus, their perspectives on parental involvement might be characterized as largely instrumental (i.e., 'when I need help, I want it and should be able to get it'). A few children even criticized parental pressures for increased independent work by the child; one recounted, for example, *"A few weeks ago, my mom told me, like–I don't know what got into her–but she said, 'Some of this stuff you know how to do. You just want the help from us.' 'No, Mom, I need the help' . . . It sort of got on my nerves."*

Research related to children's experience of work difficulty and press for independence, however, has suggested that while elementary school students often need adult guidance to understand and meet academic task demands, their ability to learn independently may not develop fully unless opportunities for exercising self-regulation and decision-making are present as well (Pressley, Borkowski, & O'Sullivan, 1984; Ryan & Connell, 1989; Grolnick & Ryan, 1987). This suggests that parents' involvement in homework should offer guiding hints that allow the child opportunities for mostly independent work. This guidance is evident in several children's interview comments. One child remarked, for example, *"She'll only have to tell me one answer, and I'll get the whole thing!"* Another offered his observation on why his parent's involvement is helpful: *"Sometimes I can't think of anything, and she gives help, and I'm like, 'Oh, yeah!' and it sparks a light bulb."*

In general, parents and children appeared to agree that parental help is an inherent component of the homework process. Rather than overtly expressing their appreciation, children

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appeared to assume that their parents knew they had an implicit, standing invitation to involvement. For example, children's remarks implied that they didn't often affirm their parents' help but rather simply took its availability as a real or implicit reality; asked if his parent's help was usually helpful, one child responded, *"It's always helpful, 'cause otherwise I wouldn't ask for it!"* Parents, for their part, also appeared to assume (consistent with Hoover-Dempsey et al.'s [1995] earlier findings), that helping children with schoolwork is just part of the 'territory' or role of being a parent (see also Hoover-Dempsey & Jones, 2000). The primary difficulties for parents in this group seemed to be found not in the decision to become involved but in the on-going struggle to provide an appropriate combination of structure *and* encouragement for the child's independent actions and work. Some parents spoke of their frustrations in trying to provide sufficient structure (e.g., *"He gets too tired to think, I'm too tired to help!"*), but many spoke with equal concern about the need to encourage appropriate independence in their children (e.g., *"It's not for me to do the work, it's for her to do the work!" "I won't be with her in class, so I help her, but I try to let her alone"*). In these concerns, parents appeared to reflect an understanding of school expectations for the child–and their own awareness or fears about the demands for independent work that would come in middle school or high school.

This exploratory study offers educators a window into parental involvement in homework, and schools might do well to recognize its simple implications. These fourth grade children's generally positive responses to parental involvement in their homework suggests that many homework assignments may exceed children's developmental capacities for successful independent completion. Thus, effective parental scaffolding of homework may be essential to children's elementary school success. While parents appear committed to helping their children learn, their efforts may be undermined by their uncertainty about how to successfully meet their children's simultaneous needs for active help or structuring, on the one hand, and support for the growing ability to handle one's educational tasks independently. Parents' need for a connection between their desire to help their children and appropriate involvement activities offers educators a valuable point of entry for strengthening family-school partnerships. By providing parents with explicit tactics and strategies for effectively helping their children with homework, teachers can help create a 'zone of proximal development' for parents and children. With teacher support for parental involvement in homework, parents' efficacy for helping their children learn and ultimately student outcomes might be enhanced. Schools that capitalize on parents' broad and early support of their children's education and children's openness to their parents' involvement may find ready avenues to significant enhancement of productive family-school partnerships.

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Notes

1. The four sources of child invitations to involvement examined in this study did not include child age, a variable consistently associated with variations in levels of parental involvement (more in the case of younger children, less in the case of older; e.g., Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Eccles & Harold, 1993). We did not include child age here because we wanted to examine closely the functioning of other potentially important child attributes inviting parents' involvement. Thus we held age relatively constant in order to examine the relative strength and influence of other child attributes hypothesized to influence parents' involvement.

2. Children were asked to identify the primary person at home who helped with homework. They received a TAMH format appropriate for that person (i.e., all items referred to "my mom" or "my dad" or "my grandmother," etc.). Similarly, parents were given a TAMCH format with the appropriate pronouns for the child (he/his, she/hers) specified throughout.

Table 1: Means, standard deviations, and correlations for all study variables

		Level of parental involvement in homework				Child's general level of academic performance				Child's difficulty with homework		Child's press for independence		Child's valuing of parental help		
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1	Child Interview: Reviewers' rating, child's perception of parent involvement	–														
2	Child TAMH Questionnaire: Parent's structuring & activities related to homework	-.22	–													
3	Parent Interview: Reviewers' rating, how involved is this parent in helping	.28	-.01	–												
4	Parent TAMCH Questionnaire: Parent structure & activities	.21	.61*	.00	–											
5	School Records: Composite of Math, Reading & Language report card grades	.22	-.40	.24	-.52*	–										
6	School Records: TCAP Total battery	.22	-.12	.30	-.21	.80***	–									
7	Child Interview: Reviewers' rating of child performance	.01	.04	.06	-.49*	.45*	.32	–								
8	Parent Interview: Reviewers' rating, parents' perception of child performance	.06	-.11	.12	-.26	.67***	.66**	.36	–							
9	Child Interview: Composite score, Child reports of difficulty with homework	.14	.29	-.29	.34	-.17	-.06	.61**	-.21	–						
10	Parent Interview: Composite score, Parent perception of child work difficulty	.07	.03	.55*	.22	-.34	-.36	-.42	-.46	.09	–					
11	Child Interview: Reviewers' rating, child press for independence	.34	-.22	.27	-.21	.30	.03	.47*	.23	-.71***	-.02	–				
12	Parent Interview: Reviewers' rating, parent perception of child press	-.61*	.07	-.45*	-.17	-.16	-.12	.16	.06	-.03	-.57**	.04	–			
13	Child Interview: Score, child's valuing of help	.45*	-.29	.09	.20	.34	.34	.16	-.16	-.06	-.19	-.03	-.26	–		
14	Parent Interview: Score, parent perception of child's valuing of help	-.06	.38	.17	.40	-.25	-.11	.00	.12	-.17	.12	.24	.06	-.32	–	
15	Parent Interview: Score, parent perception of child's affective response to help	.22	-.13	.37	-.02	.16	.33	.12	.05	-.33	.15	.18	-.17	.39	.62*	–
	$\bar{x}$	4.76	47.85	5.15	44.83	24.94	82.25	4.85	4.9	8.6	8.24	2.5	2.80	2.90	2.95	1.86
	sd	1.08	8.60	1.27	8.05	8.1	31.28	.98	1.16	1.84	1.98	1.15	1.15	0.83	.61	.29

* p< 05
** p< 01
*** p< 001

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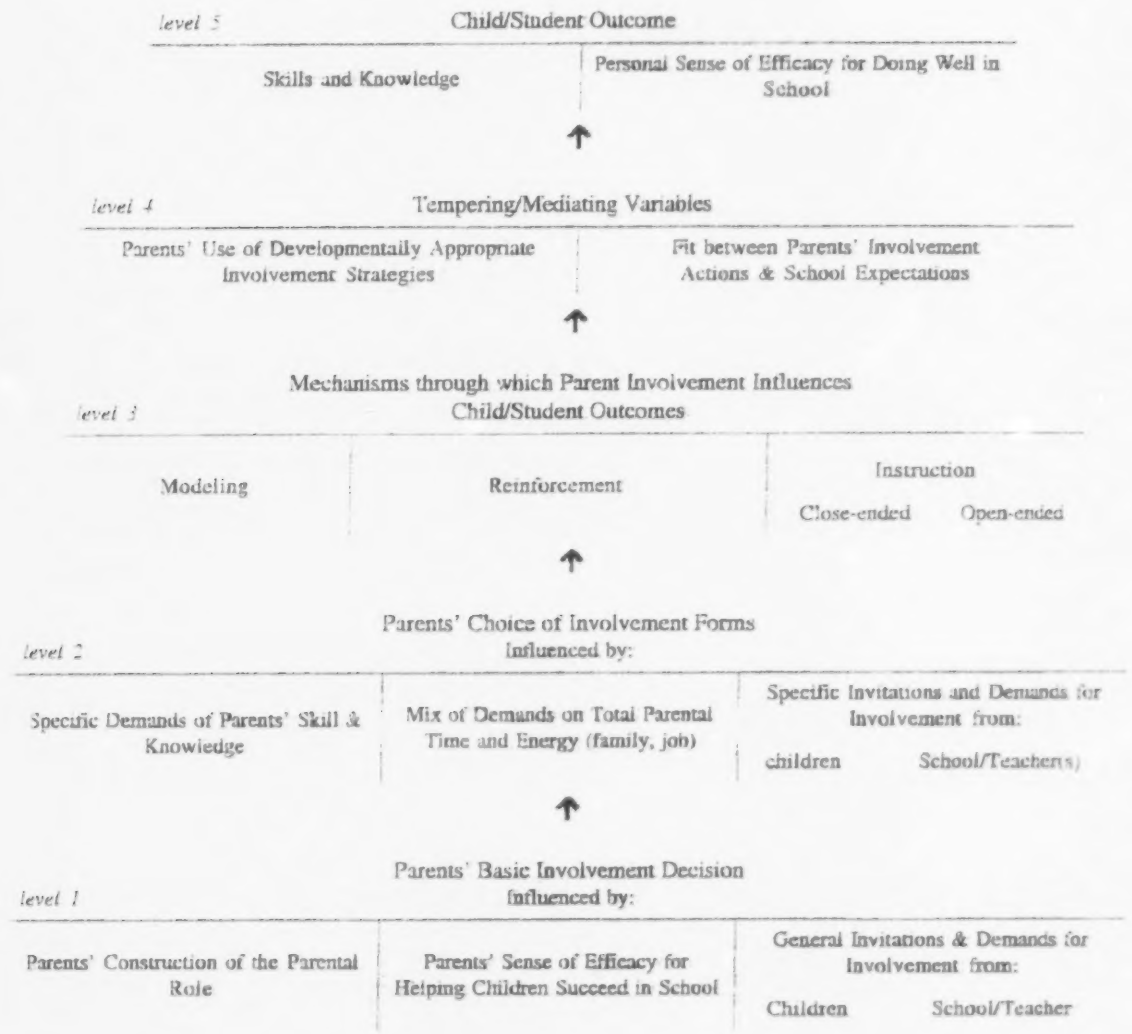
Can you help me with my homework?

Figure 1: Model of the parental involvement process


level 5
Child/Student Outcome
Skills and Knowledge
Personal Sense of Efficacy for Doing Well in School
level 4
Tempering/Mediating Variables
Parents' Use of Developmentally Appropriate Involvement Strategies
Fit between Parents' Involvement Actions & School Expectations
Mechanisms through which Parent Involvement Influences Child/Student Outcomes
level 3
Modeling
Reinforcement
Instruction
Close-ended
Open-ended
Parents' Choice of Involvement Forms Influenced by:
level 2
Specific Demands of Parents' Skill & Knowledge
Mix of Demands on Total Parental Time and Energy (family, job)
Specific Invitations and Demands for Involvement from:
children
School/Teacher(s)
Parents' Basic Involvement Decision Influenced by:
level 1
Parents' Construction of the Parental Role
Parents' Sense of Efficacy for Helping Children Succeed in School
General Invitations & Demands for Involvement from:
Children
School/Teacher

Note: From K.V. Hoover-Dempsey and H.M. Sandler (1995). Parental involvement in children's education: Why does it make a difference? Teacher's College Record, 95, 310-331; and K.V. Hoover-Dempsey and H.M. Sandler (1997). Why do parents become involved? Review of Educational Research, 67, 3-42.

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